Before the pandemic hit, the nation's manufacturing sector — including the refining and petrochemical industries — was wrestling with how to find and train enough young people to replace the wave of Baby Boomers retiring from the workforce at a rate of nearly 6,000 per day. After the pandemic struck, that challenge became more difficult due to physical distancing needs, new economic realities and other unexpected hurdles.

To better understand how the industries are managing their intern programs differently during the pandemic, we checked in with Angela Rodriguez, director of university recruitment at Phillips 66, and Kenny Braxton, talent acquisition supervisor at HollyFrontier Corporation. Below are their answers to some of our biggest questions.

First, can you tell us how extensive your internship programs are? Which departments currently offer internships?

Angela Rodriguez: Here at Phillips 66, we have approximately 200 interns, with about half of them in our corporate offices and half at the refineries and pipeline terminals. Because of COVID-19, the 100 interns in our corporate offices in Bartlesville and Houston have been working virtually while those at the refineries and terminals are actually onsite.

Kenny Braxton: Engineering internships represent the majority of opportunities we have available, so pretty much each one of our engineering departments offers internships. But we also offer internships throughout the company — including HR, IT, accounting, procurement, supply chain and logistics, internal audit, risk management, and safety and health. Our total summer intern headcount ranges from 35-40 in the U.S.

Can you describe what it's like to be an intern at your company?

Angela: Our interns get the same experience a new hire would get. If they're in the field, for example interning with chemical engineers and mechanical engineers, they're working on process safety, environmental issues, and mechanical and integrity issues like how the pipelines are operating. These are hands-on projects, so they're suiting up in PPE and working in the field.

Kenny: If you're an engineering intern, you're out there in the plant getting day-to-day, hands-on experience. Even if you're a corporate intern, you're going to be exposed to weekly "lunch and learns" to learn about refining. Refining 101 is a required course whether you're an engineering intern or a corporate intern. This internship program offers projects that allow real hands-on and meaningful experiences.

How has the pandemic affected internships and recruitment efforts?

Angela: We have an onboarding process and lunch and learns a couple of times a week all summer

long. This year all of that had to go virtual due to COVID-19, which was a challenge. But it had the advantage of having all the interns experience the same onboarding and all of them getting to participate in the same lunch and learns, hearing from leaders from across the company.

The downside of the virtual program, of course, is that we're losing that human touch. The interns can't go next door and ask their supervisor a question in person. And they're not getting pulled into random meetings that would enhance their experience. But throughout, the managers and supervisors have done a great job of being inclusive of their interns and keeping them involved.

In terms of recruiting, we're hearing from all of the colleges and universities that their career fairs will be virtual, so that will be a learning curve for everyone. We're going to have to use different tools and find new, creative ways to build and maintain relationships, but that's the world everyone is living in now.

Kenny: All of our lunch and learns are also virtual now. We normally do a big networking event for the interns with our executive leadership team, which couldn't happen this year. So what we're planning now is something we're calling The Intern Bowl. It's a virtual networking event where each location is competing against the others in games of trivia, such as "Who's the General Counsel? When was X plant built?" Questions like that. While there are fewer people in the office for them to learn from, we haven't missed a beat in terms of mentoring and guiding. The only difference is most of it has been virtual. Recruiting efforts surprisingly are about the same. I've been impressed with the campuses that have quickly adapted to this new virtual environment and provided online tools to allow recruiting events to continue to happen.

Do internships lead to employment within your company?

Angela: Absolutely! About 80 percent of our college hires come from our intern class, so you can think of the internship program as a summer-long interview.

Kenny: Yes, and we're very transparent about that from the beginning. In the Summer of 2018, we had a 40 percent conversion rate. Last year the rate was 26 percent, because we hired more sophomore students, so some of those are now returning as interns again.

Despite the challenges 2020 has brought, you still seem passionate about your programs.

Angela: It's very rewarding to work with young people who are excited to be here and are excited for their career. Last fall, I gave someone an offer and he said, "You don't understand that you just changed life for me and my family."

Kenny: There's nothing that brings me more joy than seeing a student get experience and wisdom and help them begin their career, whether it's at HollyFrontier or elsewhere. It's a real passion for me.

While operational adjustments and market shifts tend to grab headlines, it's this behind-the-scenes innovation and adaptation in training that will ensure the refining industry continues to have access to the talent it needs to continue to successfully meet tomorrow's challenges.

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